FINANCE circles were buzzing with one question yesterday: Who will succeed Dr Tony Tan as executive director and deputy chairman of Government of Singapore Investment Corp (GIC).

There has been no shortage of names bandied about, including Temasek president and former Singapore Exchange chief executive Hsieh Fu Hua and former DBS Bank chairman Koh Boon Hwee.

Mr Tan Soo Jin, director of executive search company Amrop Hever Group Singapore, noted: “The person appointed should be someone of public stature.” And the successor may not come from within the organisation, he added.

But sources say there may not be a replacement for Dr Tan, who retired from Cabinet in September 2005, and then joined GIC the same year.

“Tony Tan joined GIC as executive director. This was a position that wasn’t there before, and it doesn’t mean it needs to be filled because he has resigned,” said a GIC source.

“There is Lim Siong Guan as group president, so it depends on whether GIC wants a new executive director.”

GIC’s management structure is relatively flat, with clear reporting lines and accountability.

Dr Tan headed the senior management team and chaired the group executive committee.

The group executive committee – which includes Mr Lim, group chief investment officer Ng Kok Song and several other senior executives – is responsible for management proposals for investment and risk issues before these are submitted to the relevant board committees and the GIC board. It also reviews and approves major personnel and business policies.

While Dr Tan’s leadership is bound to be missed, industry players say GIC is in good hands as it has capable people making key strategic decisions, while its leadership renewal process is also healthy.

GIC announced the most wide-ranging changes to its senior leadership since 2007, a move aimed at achieving greater “investment firepower”.

It appointed new presidents to lead its three investment companies: asset management, special investments and real estate. The changes take effect on July 1.

“I think GIC really has matured into an institution with breadth and depth over the last 30 years,” said APS Asset Management founder Wong Kok Hwee.

“Dr Tan has made his contributions and will be missed without doubt, but GIC will carry on like all strong institutions.”

In terms of the investment process, Dr Tan’s departure should not detract GIC from managing Singapore’s long-term reserve in a strategic and professional manner, say some analysts.

“The philosophy of making safe, steady investments won’t change. The investment horizon for GIC will still be long-term, I believe,” said CIMB economist Song Seng Wun.

GIC’s latest annual report showed that it clocked a 20-year nominal annual rate of return in US dollar terms of 7.1 per cent for the 12 months up to March 31 last year.

As of March, United States-based Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute ranked GIC as the eighth-largest sovereign wealth fund in the world, with an asset portfolio valued at US$247.5 billion ($307 billion).

GIC said in a statement yesterday that “Dr Tan is working with GIC management to decide on his successors or changes to the various internal GIC appointment holds”.

"If you want to be a president, you have to represent Singapore well, not only to Singaporeans locally, but also to the international community. To do that, the person must be a person with dignity, someone everybody can be proud of. He must be somebody with good wisdom so that whatever he says is believable. The third requirement is, he must have a good international standing.

On these three (qualities), Tony Tan has the advantage. As a former deputy prime minister, he has his linkages worldwide. The first two (qualities), I think both Dr Tan and Dr Tan Cheng Rock have them.”

Professor Cham Tao Soon, 72, chairman and chancellor of SIM University and founding president of Nanyang Technological University, on qualities a president needs

“Dr Tan is someone who is very trustworthy. For example, we used to have plastic chairs at the branch office that were used at the Meet-the-People Sessions. When some of us tried to replace them with new ones, he stopped us, saying, ‘Hey they are still usable’. To me, it shows he is mindful of not being wasteful.”

Mr Goh Peng Hong, 42, a grassroots activist in Sembawang GRC, where Mr Tan Tony was an MP

“Dr Tony Tan is a very eminent candidate for the elected president and will make an outstanding president if elected. History has shown the role played by past presidents such as Mr Ong Teng Cheong, who was also at one time a part of the PAP government.

If a candidate has the right character and personality, then regardless of his background, he will be able to carry out his role. Knowing Dr Tan, I believe he will show his independence when discharging his duties. An incoming president needs to be able to grow into the role and not be weighed down by concerns about where he came from. He will have to constantly reassess his position and ask if he is doing right by the people.”

Former MP Wang Kai Yuen

A STRATEGIC THINKER, AND CARING TOO

“Dr Tony Tan has extensive experience, and everyone can see the contribution that he has made to the country. Two characteristics will stand out. He is a strategic thinker, very broad and long-term vision, always with the interest of the country in mind. The other is that he is always very caring with all the people that work with him and always making sure that we are well taken care of, and well looked after.”

Acting Community Development, Youth and Sports Minister Chan Chun Sing (right)